

# ‘All that my love and I/ Strive till after we die’: The Courtship Letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1909-1914

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Edward Vivian (Vance) Palmer (1885-1959) and Janet Gertrude (Nettie) née Higgins (1885-1964) formed one of the most important Australian literary and creative partnerships of the last century. Nettie’s reputation as the most important non-academic Australian critic working in the inter-war period is established both here and overseas. Vivian Smith describes Vance as ‘the foremost man of letters of his day’ and ‘one of the most representative figures of his time’ (263). Ongoing research continues to reveal their historical significance and the extraordinary range of their literary interests.<sup>1</sup> Yet the nature of their contribution to Australian Letters, their collaboration and especially their relationship is often still misrepresented as either repressive or sacrificial. Nettie never wrote about her husband’s work and life publicly, and H. P. Heseltine’s compilation of Vance’s autobiographical writings makes no mention of his relationship with his wife. Vivian Smith’s selection *Letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer 1915-1963* does not include any of their letters to each other before their marriage. Yet the Palmers’ passionate and extended epistolary courtship has been preserved. It is vital in understanding the conceptual basis of the creative work of Vance and Nettie Palmer and provides insight into the emotional and spiritual dimensions of Vance’s novels.<sup>2</sup> Because of the Palmers’ significance as writers, their correspondence must be considered foremost as an extension of their literary production.

When they met in the summer of 1909 the jaunty Vance, replete with his bow-tie, was already a professional writer and journalist. Nettie was studying for her final exams for an honours degree at the University of Melbourne. Frequenting the State Library of Victoria, reading the same avant-garde journals, and writing poetry, they began to talk. In that era of cloistered and chaperoned middle-class femininity to maintain a conversation with a stranger was a significant transgression.<sup>3</sup> Both aged twenty-four years

old, they wrote to each other initially as friends when Vance returned to Queensland, and then, when their affair began in London in late 1910, as lovers. Vance saved the very first note Nettie wrote to him, and it is preserved in their archives. The extraordinary nature of their protracted romance has produced something much like a vast epistolary novel, full of joy and humour, uncertainty and seduction, tragedy and anticipation. 'Every word you write is like a kiss', Vance told her (Palmer and Palmer, *Courtship* 513). Nettie's love letters came twice a week for nearly three years. Over 350,000 words survive from when they met until their marriage in 1914. The collection is perhaps the finest series of courtship letters ever likely to be archived in Australia with its sweep of action, quality of writing and fullness of detail.<sup>4</sup>

Recent international scholarship examines the private letter as a part of the writer's literary production (Jolly and Stanley *passim*). Complex and self-aware, writing to each other as readers as well as friends/lovers, the Palmers may be considered in parallel with other intellectual couples working in the literary and artistic field, where aesthetic skills are a crucial part of the currency of love.<sup>5</sup> And while invariably many writers have written letters of love, the Palmers' letters are more than this: they are part of the very process of courtship marking the transition from friendship to love. Similar surviving collections of letters by writers where a relationship is conducted in the realm of the imaginary, and friends become lovers with little actual physical presence of bodies, are rare.<sup>6</sup> The letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, both already established and influential poets, still of child-bearing years (he 32, she 38), were instrumental in their union. There have been several editions of their letters both complete and selected (Browning and Barrett, *Letters*; Browning and Barrett, *Correspondence*).<sup>7</sup> Dowell O'Reilly *From His Letters* provides a second point of comparison. Dowell O'Reilly (1865-1923), the Sydney writer, politician and public servant wooed Mollie Miles, his English cousin, a theosophist and writer.<sup>8</sup> After O'Reilly's death Mollie sought Nettie's advice and support on the selection of her courtship letters for publication.<sup>9</sup>

Roland Barthes warns that in our modern era 'we see no important language that is able to deal with the feelings of love' (287). At times the Palmers attempted to develop such a language of love: overall the Palmer courtship letters vary in content, style and range. While the letters are not sexually explicit, erotic or frank about their desires and their bodies, they are playful and witty, and seductive in terms of late Edwardian conventions. They do differ significantly in terms of the phase of Vance and Nettie's relationship—as they got to know each other and each other's fundamental values; as the

friendship developed and became more intimate; and as they tested each other and overcame obstacles in their path. When they became lovers in 1910 with the revelation of their love and physical intimacy, their letters began to express passion, confession, need and loneliness. As they moved closer to marriage, they reflected on their own past and looked to the shared future. Vance and Nettie's love letters provide intimate insights into pre-war literary and gender politics, especially on contemporary debates in literary and socialist circles in Melbourne and Brisbane, literary modernism in London and the *New Age*, the rise of the New Journalism, the New Woman, and the international phonetics movement. As Liz Stanley finds, 'there is always a referential basis of particular lives lived in specific social contexts and historical circumstances', to any epistolary (Jolly and Stanley 85). In the following pages of this essay, the primary concern is not about historical specificities but rather is about how to contextualise the letters on the level of discourse. The letters, all written before the Great War, require exegesis to reveal their emotional depth, literary quality and spiritual allusion.

The Palmers, like the Barrett Brownings, crafted rich letters displaying their literary and poetic talents. Like the Palmers, the Barrett Brownings discussed the nature and meaning of life and love, politics, the relations between language, poetry, spirit and emotion, and their future together. Their now iconic correspondence was necessary because of Barrett's confinement to home through illness, and her tyrannical father who decreed that none of his offspring should marry. Their first letter was in January 1845; they eloped in September 1846. While the Palmers make no mention of the Browning Barrett correspondence, during their courtship they chose to read together, on different sides of the globe, Browning's largest and most sustained verse novel *The Ring and the Book*. O'Reilly and Mollie's correspondence deepened after the death of O'Reilly's first wife.<sup>10</sup> O'Reilly, then 48 had three children (including Pixie who later became a novelist in her own right as Eleanor Dark). In November 1915 O'Reilly made an informal proposal and they married, like the Palmers, after nearly five years of letters.

A critical component of a love letter is that its meanings relate very much to shared meanings understood by its intended recipient. In 1928 Nettie's views on published courtship epistolaries appeared in her review of O'Reilly's letters:

Every word has still to be operative, to tell, so that the distant correspondent may know the man and the life and the place which awaits her. By the time we have read the book we know them, too. Perhaps those who may feel a scruple about reading letters not written

for publication will, after all, understand me when I say that the book is so edited as to be rounded and complete, like a satisfying work of fiction. The people mentioned are 'characters' whose reality depends on the 'author's' mind. In every way it is a fortunate thing that this book has been given to our world. (*Courier*, 25)<sup>11</sup>

Nettie notes the need for words in a letter to be 'operative', just as recent theories of the letter argue for the letter's importance as 'performative'. Letters strive to overcome distance to re-establish an exchange between 'two individuals because they imply a return message'; indeed, they are primarily 'performative' (Bossis 64). While a letter can be valued for its skill, charm, style, authenticity or insight, just as Nettie noted in her review of O'Reilly's writing style, the meaning of those effects is specific not just to time and place but also to the addressee (Jolly and Stanley 76). Karlin warns us how, despite the strong sense of living presence as the third person turns the pages of a correspondence (especially in such protracted courtships), 'we cannot recover the sense of what these letters meant in the living privacy of their making and reading', the 'self-imposed circle', 'the originally enclosed spot', the meaning of the real relationship between two living beings (Browning and Barrett, *Correspondence* xii). G. K. Chesterton<sup>12</sup> admonished Browning for being obtuse in his courtship correspondence, that he 'might as well have been expressing the most noble and universal sentiment in the dialect of the Cherokees' (65). He also described the correspondence as a 'gradual progress and amalgamation of two spirits of great natural potency and independence'. It can be even argued that a correspondence is a joint endeavour, in which meaning is the product of collaboration (Bossis 68).

The extent of courtship/seduction actually conducted through these three literary courtship correspondences allows us to suggest similarities in their amorous discourse. Vance and Nettie were more often apart and in different hemispheres than together in the five years preceding marriage. Browning made his first declaration of love when meeting Barrett for the first time, but she rejected him; the relationship was begun and sustained by letters. The O'Reillys did not actually meet physically until after they were deeply involved. Linda Kauffman finds that love letters in general are an identifiable genre, in her analysis of lovers' discourse and its relation to fiction(1), and she argues that love letters share certain characteristics. In the initial phase of the three courtships we can see some of these characteristics, that is, the transgression of generic boundaries, the subversion of gender roles, and the staging of revolt through the act of writing. After the transition from friendship to love we find, as we shall explore in the Palmer correspondence, other identifiable features of the genre, that is, 'writing in the absence of the

beloved' and 'mourning the inadequacies of language'(1). In addition to Kauffman's characteristics, however, a powerful and abiding core of each of the three correspondences was their criticism of each other's work, and richly interwoven intertextual dialogue.

In Nettie's first note to Vance she appears to have enclosed a longer letter—signed by that romantic figure, the Lady of Shalott. Nettie had been writing poetry, short vignettes, essays, yarns and letters since early childhood. She used various pseudonyms. The Lady of Shalott, a favourite, was the mythic figure of Tennyson's poem, cursed to live in a tower weaving her tapestry from reflections of the outside in her mirror. Looking out directly at Lancelot, Shalott feels the power of the curse and, floating down the river, sings her last song. (Vancelot was the name Esmonde Higgins, Nettie's young brother, gave to Vance once the letters started arriving.) The guise Vance chose for himself was that of the symbol of the New Woman, the Advanced woman, Vivie Warren, a dramatic heroine from *Mrs Warren's Profession*, the banned play, a critique of respectability by George Bernard Shaw.

The Lady of Shalott wrote:

'I put down the play with you in it, feeling that you were the grandest girl there ever was to trample on your own desires so decisively, with no looking back, no sentimentalising, even tearing up Frank's letter on the spot . . . and then I thought Beauty and Romance, beauty and romance, Viv, how could you give up the notion without even looking at it.' (Courtship 125-6)

Vance as Vivie replied:

'Don't think I was ever insensible to beauty and romance. I hated only the ugly things they covered for those whose insight was not sufficiently keen to penetrate their thin veil.' (Courtship 139)

Through the use of these pseudonyms Vance and Nettie were freed to discuss issues that may have been more difficult face to face in their everyday guises. With immediate intellectual intimacy because of their shared interest in contemporary literature, they discussed, as virtual strangers, love and marriage, emotion and sentiment, prostitution, nature and virtue, and other ethical and philosophical issues. For Vance the thin veil concealed Victorian and Edwardian conventions and property relations, and the sentimentality epitomised by the drawing-room 'doll'. Vivie, alias Vance, continued:

'You called me the grandest girl that ever was pained me [. . .] You are different from me therefore you must dispute my judgments or you won't be true to yourself.'

In these lines Vance established the boundaries of the correspondence, and with Nettie's desire to push at the extremes a vast discursive space opened between them. Nettie was very consciously staging a revolt against middle-class conventions through the act of writing. After a few months of writing from her parent's home she was forced to ask Vance to write to her care of the University. Presumably discretion was needed to pre-empt parental disapproval: 'if that crookedness disgusts you', she continued, 'silence, of course, would not be nearly as painful as the knowledge that your writing was in any way forced' (*Courtship* 155). An open exchange was essential to its continuance for both correspondents.

A central feature of the Palmers' correspondence was their criticism of each other's work, just as in the Barrett Browning letters.<sup>13</sup> Nettie's first letter thanked Vance for showing her his writing. As two aspiring creative writers, two young radical intellectuals, both reared in the relative isolation of the colonial margins of the British Empire, both from dissenting families, with common intellectual interests in Russian, English, European, American and Australian literatures, Vance and Nettie's joint need for response and exchange was invigorating. Their critical roles were carefully negotiated, not always smoothly. Nettie was shy about sharing her poetry and only after the correspondence was underway did Vance receive a sheaf of manuscript poems. When Vance prevaricated about posting her his first manuscript novel, she responded 'I felt like sending you a wire and demanding it by return wire' (*Courtship* 212). He tried to explain: 'I don't think that any of the characters as they live in my mind are wholly pathetic or ridiculous but on a first introduction they seem to have that appearance' (*Courtship* 209) then made it worse: 'When I addressed you as a Roman Critic [with absolute right of judgment] I was really talking of something quite beyond my depth and I forgot who was listening.' Early in the correspondence Vance constructed Nettie as an intellectual genius moving in realms of spirit, soul and coincidence especially in her understanding of Schopenhauer.

Nettie, for her part, actively used her letters to Vance to explore political issues and engage in debates usually denied her. Her uncles would not talk about the strike<sup>14</sup> to her, she complained, nor the men at the 'varsity' (Jordan, 1999 *passim*). She questioned Vance about different political philosophies and different political groups. Because of the extent of Nettie's engagement with the New Woman and feminist ideas, because of her later public writing and because of Vance's work as a fiction writer, the boundaries of private and public are often blurred in the letters. Nettie's discussions with Vance were to have intellectual repercussions for her and transformed her public writing: her

letters to Vance operated as ‘*empowering texts*’, a phrase used by Sarah Klein in her study of women’s activism in America (27). We can trace Nettie’s initial emergence as a political writer and gifted linguist through her contributions to contemporary journals in Melbourne. Through the support she drew on from Vance, she gave up her pseudonyms in the press signing herself ‘Nettie Higgins’ to poems, translations and occasional social comment.

During the period in which they first met, Vance was only in Melbourne for four weeks. His brief and formal farewell note read, ‘we shall have a chance to argue about the universe on some future occasion—I am taking that for granted’ (Courtship 124). It is followed by Nettie’s lengthy response to his address in Brisbane:

You say that my ‘friendship’ meant something to you while in Melbourne [. . .] Friendship’s a good enough word to cover everything: but can it be friendship when—well, I seemed to give nothing. This isn’t humility but mere investigation . . . Was that friendship, when I was as constrained and self-conscious with you as I am with a diary? (Courtship 146)

The correspondence developed into a regular, lengthy and lively exchange through the first half of 1909 as they tested each other’s politics, ethics and understandings. Nettie bubbled with charm and insight as if to astonish her correspondent with her daring and advanced views. Vance described her as ‘communicating the spirit of Melbourne’ just as he, too, expressed the life of sub-tropical Brisbane (Courtship 195). His first novel was about a girl student at university and he made her a promise: She won’t have any of your characteristics or those of any of the friends you may happen to have mentioned (Courtship 204).<sup>15</sup> Nettie enrolled to study for a diploma in education. Both of them were reading Galsworthy, Francis Adams and Tolstoy and grappled with concepts of privilege, class and status both theoretically and practically as well as the question of how to position themselves in relation to the ‘common’ people.

By mid 1909 inspired by the writings of Steele Rudd to seek out the authentic voice of bush Australians, Vance worked on Abbieglassie station, over 800 km west of Brisbane in the ‘back of beyond’, Kooma country. Various resident at the station were eighty Aboriginal people of the language group Gunggari. These were formative months in Vance’s beliefs as a writer especially his notions about Aboriginality, belonging and country (Jordan, 2008 *passim*). The very ‘remoteness’ of the cattle station led Nettie to write long letters about literary and political developments and of her personal encounters in Melbourne circles. He encouraged her. As their friendship grew, their intimacy developed.

They became more forthright, openly discussing affairs of their friends in considerable detail (while continuing to critique each others' writing). Later Vance reflected on the value of her letters:

You were just a wonderful girl with some sort of magic sincerity and I was just a young man who moved about & could discuss things. We got to know one another a lot but we didn't show the moments when we felt that there was no skin over our hearts, and you wouldn't have come to me if you were being crushed and broken. (Courtship 393)

Their letters explored the range and degree of their compatibility. They challenged each other on the nature of their commitment to fundamental values. They discussed male and female friendships as models for new relationships between men and women. Vance was finally convinced Nettie's belief in radical politics and socialism was close to matching his own only after her poem 'So Comrades Can We Do It?' was published in the *Socialist* (Higgins 2). They started to make clear, in different ways, the importance of the correspondence for themselves.

In February 1910 Nettie sailed for London. Vance timed a farewell letter to arrive just as the ship departed. In certain historical conjunctions of both youth and intense political innovation, the capacity for living is heightened. William Wordsworth gloried in an earlier period: 'Bliss in that dawn it was to be alive, but to be young was very heaven!' (Wordsworth, 2) At the height of the British Empire, with the dawning of a new era (post federation) in Australia and the success of the suffrage struggle, possibilities for the future seemed endless. London, a metropolis for colonial elites, was alive with the combinatory effects of pre-war modernist and avant-garde experimentation as well as the radical new political and religious ideas in circulation (Boehmer 22). Nettie and later Vance were not the only young people to find the creative intellectual ferment and freedom of London (and Europe) close to heaven. Nettie's spiritual and intellectual realisations, more often recorded in her diary than her letters (Jordan 1999 *passim*), were shaped by her reading both of Edward Carpenter, the visionary socialist, who believed that love was a form of higher consciousness, cosmic consciousness, and a third stage of consciousness (the foundation of socialism) and R. M. Bucke who refused the oppositions between secular and sacred, and of science and religion (Weir *passim*).

The patterns of reference in the courtship letters have a rhetorical as well as objective function. Nettie told Vance:

Do you know, anyone who has done some thinking and who has trafficked in words develops touch words of his own, and by the way



in which those words are used from time to time the reader can learn quite a lot. Tell you what I think yours are? No, not I, for then you'd never use them unconsciously again—and I have just begun to be sure of them. (Courtship 225)

One such 'touch word', or dialect, in the Palmer letters is Vance's use of 'universe', a word which allowed him to explore vast imaginary geographies. Initially he used it to indicate the dimensions of space as well as geography. He was situated in his own universe—the extent of his awareness? And he implied his self sufficiency within his own universe, the creator of worlds. Later he discussed other thinkers, such as Hilaire Belloc and John Emery, in context of their capacity to work with the forces (both good and evil) within the universe and he identified those who believed in a divine purpose within the universe, although he disagreed with them (671). On some occasions (especially in their discussion of Galsworthy), Vance seemed to be defying the gender imperatives of the culture in submitting to a higher law, viewing men and women as spiritual beings, rather than subject to conventional property relations. In doing so, he offered Nettie some possibility of reconciling her feminism and economic integrity. In contrast, Nettie's use of the word was much more in the modern sense and she was much more likely to discuss her 'soul' than her universe. On one occasion she found it difficult to explain to her cosmopolitan fellow students that 'Australia is the centre of the universe' (320).

Can we describe this phase of their correspondence, a conversation about values through words, as 'falling in love'? Francesco Alberoni, the Italian sociologist, defines falling in love as a process, 'the birth of a new collective "we" constructed out of two or more individuals' (6). Alberoni is particularly suggestive in seeing love as a collective movement involving two individuals. Vance and later Nettie echoed these ideas: 'There is no part of me that is private or hidden from you, dear mate; we're together sometimes against the world' (Courtship 801). Further, Alberoni argues there is a close relationship between the great collective movements of history and falling in love, and while he distinguishes between the two (7), the common aspects of the visionary elements in both the Palmers' thinking became clearer as their correspondence progressed. It was these shared beliefs in art facilitating a state of communion with a higher reality which became the basis of much of their later collaborative work.

Suddenly, some months after Vance's arrival in London in 1910, their exchanges are transformed, dramatically, into lyrical letters of passion, vulnerability, intimacy and openness. They are words of the night of love and then the

white dawn. And of course they are very brief, mere notes arranging to meet, for while living in the same city unencumbered by family, presence was all important. They suggest all the classic signs of a deep and abiding love—in the nascent stage, as distinct from the institutional phase, as Alberoni would define it (1). Nettie became for Vance ‘the dearest girl in the universe’. He told her:

I’m ever so glad that my country is ‘our’ country and that we can take it as one of the great revelations of the universe, not merely as a place that has to be made attractive for emigrants. (Courtship 398)

When love is understood as a transforming experience and an experience of transcendence—and indeed as Charles Lindholm finds (69), the experience of transcendence most characteristic of the modern world, romantic love can be seen as based in existential yearning. This interpretation best frames how both Vance and especially Nettie perceived the nature of their love. Barthes reminds us that ‘love is an order of affirmative values that resist all attack’ (287). In Vance and Nettie’s shared understandings, through the erotic charge between them, we can begin to understand the Palmers’ defiance of conventional understandings of male and female friendship, and colonial and imperial relationships.

Both the Palmers were of Irish background and their wit and whimsy bubble all through their correspondence. The form, content and style of Vance and Nettie’s letters change somewhat when Nettie returned to the continent to study phonetics in Germany and France for six months. During the course, she was supposed to only speak and read in German, then French. Her letters and Vance’s are less frivolous, rather more frequent and probing; they discuss issues, problems especially of intergenerational differences over religious observances and family prayers, entanglements of the present circumstances and the past; they are partly in confessional mode, and they reminisce about childhood and family. Both Vance and Nettie were grappling with *fin de siècle* challenges to institutional religion and Edwardian rituals. They were familiar with Bernard O’Dowd’s concept of the ‘Common Room’, the mystical unity of all things similar to Emerson’s Oversoul, where ‘a wrong is done to men,/What’er their race or birth,/The wound is felt, again, again/By every man on earth’ (O’Dowd 82). They used his notion as a talisman for their commitment and union, in a virtual realm if not in the physical world.

At times the sense of presence of the other lover could be overwhelming and both Vance and Nettie celebrated this communion in the other’s physical absence. When, similarly, Browning told Barrett of the bliss of communication with her image, she (wiser than Nettie and more ‘humanely sensible’) retorted

that that she was 'half-jealous' of her fantasy presence for the real flesh and blood woman sat waiting 'cold at heart' wanting her letter (Karlin 214-5). O'Reilly and Mollie, the theosophist, developed this mystical communion even further from different sides of the globe.<sup>16</sup> So, too, did Vance and Nettie: after announcing their engagement in September 1911 Nettie returned to Melbourne; Vance stayed in London to work. Their letters, at this time, not only celebrate their love but also search for reassurance and assistance in overcoming the physical separation. Both of the lovers were confronted with the intertwining circles of life and death; they also had to face the tragedies of people close to them. Vance's younger brother, in love, struggled with despair and madness when rejected; Nettie's close female friends challenged sexual stereotypes and suffered. Vance and Nettie could not marry for a couple of years until Vance was more secure financially and one senses the need to retreat, especially for Nettie, to consolidate her intellectual, spiritual and sexual ferment. She was not yet free from her obligations to family. Alberoni's interpretation of the continuation of the nascent state of love in the imagination after separation (although not rejection) provides an apt model of the way that while their lives apart unfolded normally, its emotional and ethical centre lay with the other (123). One of Vance's greatest sources of joy was in remembered rapture: Nettie found her longing and suffering like the spiritual life she had 'always dreamt of'. Love became the internal place of regeneration. Nettie told Vance: 'I've been in a hundred different moods & environments this week . . . and always, at any minute I've felt that you were at least as near as anything I saw or heard (Courtship 400).

Vance repeatedly bemoaned the limitations of communication through the post: 'Letters are such inadequate things, and they're often impossible when I want to talk to you most' (Courtship 225). He was deeply engaged with Nettie's words:

I wonder if you've ever guessed what a revolution your letters work in my week and how the whole world seems to stop for awhile waiting for the postman to knock. I am almost ashamed to confess, even to you, how much time I spend on them. (Courtship 1029)

They continued to create complex letters in the effort to make friendship, romance and marriage their own.

The gender politics in play between Vance and Nettie emerge more clearly in the later letters as marriage approaches in their plans and discussions about where they will live, the sexual division of labour, the possibility of children and, as Alberoni would have it, the process by which falling in love became an institution (31). Vance no longer positions Nettie as the intellectual genius,

rather, he asks her to learn how to type and take on the task of collecting press cuttings (Jordan 1999, 110). Nettie retaliated by telling Vance that she could hardly cook (1055). Subversion of gender roles in some form is a characteristic of the three correspondences. While bell hooks argues genuine love between females and males can emerge only in a context where the sexes would come together to challenge and change patriarchal thought (33), equality was easier to approach in the realm of the imagination and the meeting of minds. 'How strange this is—we love one another but each has kept his (her) mind free' (*Letters* 102), O'Reilly found, as he confronted his essentialist beliefs (as argued in *Tears and Triumph*). Nettie's concept of lovers and equals drawn from Carpenter was a young modern woman's understanding, a woman without children capable of supporting herself economically.

The Palmer letters archive finishes with a further example of a distinctive genre of the immigrant and traveller—a letter diary, written in instalments, which Nettie compiled when finally sailing to London to meet up with Vance in London to marry him.

Sweetheart, I have lain with your head on my breast and you have told me so much, till our lives are one life. I've made such wonderful love-songs with you in them. They hang in the night, over the sea, like stars that only you and I could see. Dear and soon we shall have our own life realised on this earth. (Courtship 1058)

Vance and Nettie were married in 1914 and, despite the outbreak of the Great War, both of them published two volumes of poetry in the next year. Nettie's books *The South Wind* (1914) and *Shadowy Paths* (1915) contain many of her love-songs: Vance's poems in *The Forerunners* (1915) and *The Camp* (1920) have only a few poems about women. Luce Irigaray argues that ultimately the other as lover, *cannot* be transformed into discourse, fantasies, or dreams. It is impossible for the lover to substitute any other, thing or god, for the other—the body remembers (216). Barrett wrote of her 'return to life' after her marriage; Karlin traces the shifts from her previous thinking with its divides between the material and spiritual realms, to an understanding of a more earthly realm appropriating the values of bliss, harmony, and salvation (270). Nettie, too, faced a comprehensive revision of the intellectual, emotional and physical system she had developed in separation from Vance. Her twice weekly regular letter to Vance preceded her literary journalism and essays on a diverse range of topics, in a style at once intimate and inclusive. We can readily identify the metamorphosis of Nettie's rhetoric of passion from an authentic amorous epistolary discourse into her work as a critic with its host of richly connotative cultural tropes of compassion and nurturance, a site of affirmation in recognition of other creative voices.

The transformation of Vance's amorous epistolary discourse was played out most clearly in his poetry, fiction and drama. In 'The Wanderer' he explained a need to express ongoing revelation of country:

I have taken for bride the wind's daughter,  
The shining fields are hid from sight  
By dark rain, and grey flood-water,  
And there's no roof at the fall of night. (*Forerunners*, X111)

In his second volume, the poem 'The Wanderer to His Love' revealed paradoxically ethical reasons for not writing love poetry, indeed even as Irigaray would have it 'ethical fidelity to incarnation' (217):

The wonder of your quiet face and magical eyes  
Stirs me, and I am dumb. (*Camp* 27)

The shifts, integration and transitions in his thinking about the relationship between men and women, lovers and eroticism can be suggested through his Rann Daly novels beginning with his popular lively romantic fiction. *The Enchanted Island* (1923) through to the later novel *The Outpost* (1924) explore male-female relationships but they are transitional novels marking the great shifts in discourses about love and friendship between the sexes after the Great War, to its modern focus on the active sexual being. A later generation of critics was hostile to these early novels; even the usually sympathetic Heseltine described *The Enchanted Island* as 'total surrender to the simple romance of polite escapism' (61). Read against the background of Vance's love letters, different and more nuanced readings will be possible. *The Man Hamilton* (1928), for instance, is primarily a critique of the colonial romance and an exploration of love. This was misread by contemporaries such as the novelist Katharine Prichard who thought that the inclusion of the white heroine, Nina Byrne, was market-driven (Walker 171).

In the Palmers' lengthy, lively and active correspondence, connections between domination, gender and property were mutually unsettled. Like the Barrett Brownings, they found that the letter allowed them to open up a discursive space and afforded them social power: their 'self imposed circle' enabled and created the intellectual, emotional and spiritual commitment that sustained them through separation. The similarities between the Palmers' correspondence and that of the Barrett Brownings and even the O'Reillys' might be explained, as Kauffman would have it, as the reiteration of the same codes of love ceaselessly, because they are inevitably drawn from literature itself (313). But the private letter is an action or gesture, as well as a representation of one. While there were broad structural similarities in the correspondents' lives, in the friendship developed through a mutual interest

in literature and the necessity of separation while they were falling in love, the differences between the correspondences were substantial, especially in the timing of the correspondence in the trajectory of these writers' lives, the shifting historical circumstances and even the possibilities of fulfilling their artistic commitments. A reason for the Palmers' relative silence about their passion is suggested in the ethical views Vance raised about breaching Nettie's confidence in the writing of his very first novel: the promise of silence he may well have kept. Biographical readings of the letters will reveal other tragic reasons for Vance's struggle with his muse. What came after their marriage for the Palmers with the birth of their two daughters during the Great War, a war that demolished many of their dreams, was of an entirely different order from the discursive space they had opened up. The veil of privacy with which the Palmers concealed their own relationship underlines the importance of their extraordinary courtship epistolary as a time of intellectual and artistic freedoms, and innovation and exploration in their trajectory as writers.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Vance Palmer is best known for his fiction, short-stories and drama, and his early intervention in debates about Australian history in *National Portraits* and *The Legend of the Nineties*. *The Passage* is usually seen as his most important novel. Nettie Palmer is known for the range and breadth of her cultural criticism which led to selections of her essays on literature, on different places and her journal *Fourteen Years*. Her biography of *Henry Bournes Higgins* was an important early study and so too her critical studies of Henry Handel Richardson and *Bernard O'Dowd*.
- <sup>2</sup> Also the letters will provide invaluable evidence in biographical studies especially of Vance.
- <sup>3</sup> This remained one of their secrets of many years.
- <sup>4</sup> Professor Carole Ferrier, University of Queensland, Associate Professor Maryanne Dever, Monash University and the author are currently working on the transcription of the courtship letters. I would like to thank them both for their contribution to this discussion. I would also like to thank Equity Trustees for permission to quote from the Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers held in the National Library of Australia.
- <sup>5</sup> That is, for instance, rather than Australian discourses of romantic love that became increasingly sexualised in the century from 1860. See Hsu-Ming Teo, 'Love Writes: Gender and Romantic Love in Australian Love Letters, 1860-1960', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 20.48 (November 2005): 343-361.
- <sup>6</sup> Most love letters are surely those between separated lovers whether outside their control, such as through war, or for a whole range of more individual reasons.

- <sup>7</sup> Daniel Karlin's exemplary reconstruction of the courtship is especially fruitful in suggesting levels of analysis and the contribution of meticulous cultural historicism.
- <sup>8</sup> It was a continuation of a correspondence with her mother, his aunt, begun after he visited England as a child.
- <sup>9</sup> She was long familiar with his published writings having included some of it in her course on Australian writing, taught during the Great War. She corresponded with him before he died.
- <sup>10</sup> Eleanor O'Reilly née McCulloch.
- <sup>11</sup> When H. M. Green noted them in his *A History of Australian Literature*, some years later, he concluded 'though they reflect something of O'Reilly's charm, they are also sentimental, extremely self-conscious and not very interesting' (672) concealing them from the next generation of readers. The O'Reillys' full exchange warrants a separate study.
- <sup>12</sup> While in England from 1910 to 1915, Vance was a close friend of Cecil Chesterton, G. K. Chesterton's brother.
- <sup>13</sup> 'the ways in which they praised each other's poetry was central to the courtship' (Karlin 59).
- <sup>14</sup> Not a reference to Henry Bournes Higgins who was overseas at the time. The strike referred to is presumably that at Broken Hill in 1909 over wages and conditions.
- <sup>15</sup> No copies appear to have survived.
- <sup>16</sup> O'Reilly advised her: 'Divest yourself of your sanity as I have done, let our souls play together like children in this moonlight phantasy—it will so soon be bedtime' (*Letters* 211). His explicit and complex instructions on self-protection and how to negotiate the differences between dream and reality were in case her actions were construed as madness.

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